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Local & State

TALLAHASSEE DEMOCRAT

Company awaits word on permit for river cleanup

By Bruce Ritchie
DEMOCRAT STAFF WRITER

Taylor County's largest employer wants action on its 3-year-old request to clean up the Fenholloway River by piping waste from its pulp mill in Perry to the Gulf of Mexico.

The state delayed issuing a pipeline permit to Buckeye Florida in March 1998 when the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency raised objections and launched a review of the plant, which employs 850 workers.

Buckeye officials earlier this month sent information to EPA officials to address their concerns in the hope of speeding up the review process, company spokeswoman Sondra Dowdell said.

"It is not moving as fast as we would like, but it is moving," she said. "We would hope that ultimately we would get our permit so we can restore the Fenholloway River." Buckeye and Florida officials in June 1998 requested a hearing on the federal agency's concerns.

An EPA official said a hearing may be held

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PIPELINE

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next spring. He said the agency now is studying the plant and how it affects the environment to determine whether its pollution can be reduced.

Environmental groups oppose the pipeline proposal, arguing the plant should reduce pollution rather than piping it to the Gulf.

The plant, which began operating in 1954, discharges 50 million gallons of waste daily into the river. The dark waste, which kills plants by blocking their sunlight, has destroyed about 10 square miles of seagrass beds in the Gulf of Mexico.

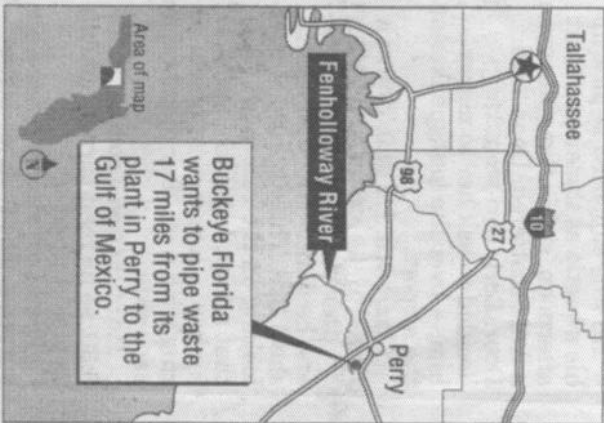
A five-year study issued by the state in 1994 recommended the plant reduce its pollution and build the 17-mile pipeline to the Gulf, thus minimizing environmental harm, state officials said.

The state Department of Environmental Protection recommended issuing a permit in October 1997. But EPA objected in a May 26 letter, saying it wants to study new production technologies that could reduce pollution.

EPA has been studying nutrient levels and color in the Fenholloway River to determine whether the plant can meet state pollution requirements without a pipeline, said Marshall Hyatt, an EPA official in Atlanta.

EPA officials will visit the plant again in the coming weeks to determine whether pollution can be reduced, Hyatt said.

"Our philosophy is we would rather see the company spend any



JOHN ROBERGE/Democrat

money on making improvements to reduce the pollution they are discharging rather than on a pipeline that won't reduce the pollution," he said.

Environmentalist Linda Young criticized Buckeye for not making some pollution reductions recommended by EPA in 1998.

"All you've got to do is go down and look at the river, and it is still as black and greasy and stinky as anything," she said. Young represents the Clean Water Network, a coalition of environmental groups.

Florida Department of Environmental Protection official Vince Seibold said the state, like Buckeye, has been waiting for EPA to set a hearing date.

"We are both asking EPA to move along with it," Seibold said.

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